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Forever falls the sand, the glass is never empty,  
 Fed from the running fingers of Eternity.  
 The sands are ages:  
 Forever weep the Clepsydræ;  
 Their tears the universal grief express,  
 And drop into the bosom of Eternity.  
 But what are empires and the endless years  
 Unto the Soul that holdeth all!  
 Behold the infinite, far-shining, everlasting Soul—  
 Behold the Human Soul!

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## ON THE INTERPRETABILITY OF MUSIC.

By LEWIS J. BLOCK.

Is music interpretable? Are the magnificent masterpieces of the great musicians surcharged with an ideal content, or are they merely a harmonious arrangement of sounds in progressions and relations which shall be rhythmic, and, therefore, pleasurable to the human ear? Carlyle some years ago demonstrated to an incredulous English-speaking public that poetry was more than the pastime of an indolent leisure; Ruskin has devoted his unequalled resources of description and invective to a similar vindication of painting; and Wagner and the adherents of the so-called "Music of the Future" have done splendid battle for a right appreciation of their art.

Those who hold that the great musical masterpieces contain a definite ideal meaning which can be, although inadequately perhaps, reproduced in words, have many objections to meet. We are told that music is of such a nature that everybody, of necessity, puts his own conception into it; that the same music serves equally well for widely discordant subjects; that the conversion of music into a definitely expressive language deprives it of its chief charm, namely, its delicious vagueness and generality, which are of power to plunge the soul into an infinite dream of ineffable ecstasy and glory.

I do not intend to answer directly all or any one of these objections. I believe firmly that the defenders of the new school of music are in the right, and I shall give briefly my reasons for such belief. I shall thus be enabled to give an

answer to the question: Is music interpretable? and, at the same time, make reply to those holding contrary views.

The human spirit, in its journey through the realms of time and generation, passes through three distinct phases of life and experience: 1. The phase of mere feeling; 2. The phase of analytic intellectual cognition; 3. The phase of real being, in which all its powers conjoin in a totality of emotion, thought, and deed.

The child is an incarnate song. Its consciousness is a succession of feelings, which pursue one another with a delightful evanescence. It is incapable of an accurate definition of its conceptions; no thought stands out from another in clear limitation; it dwells in a world where all is each and each is all; its speech is necessarily an inarticulate cry, whose meaning is everything because it is nothing. In other words, it does not speak; it sings. Out of this world of involved and convolved feelings, in which nothing has yet arisen into clear consciousness, emerges a form of expression as general as vague, as beautiful as its own fleeting loveliness. Out of this wonderful labyrinth of enwoven emotions emerges music, the only art, yet extant, capable of giving it garment and speech.

Under the world of our conscious thought-life, therefore, we find this marvellous twilight world of emotions, this restless ocean of feelings, touched here and there with golden resplendence, dusky here and there with gloom of accumulated shadows. Not that these worlds are defined, one from the other; they interfuse and mingle: emotion, like some congealing nebula, orbing into distinct globes of thought; and thought engirding itself with the singing-robcs of feeling. But it is enough for my purpose to show, that, over and above its conscious thinking life, the human spirit dwells in a region of feeling where its world of overt realities exists only as germs of a possible realization. The spirit may sink back into a primeval chaos, as it were, where the sky and the earth and the free vital air are not, as yet, lost in a blissful dream of the universe as yet one, entire, and unbroken into the infinite multiplicities of the things we see and the pains we feel. Out of this ecstasy arises the voice of song.

In a recent book called "*Music and Morals*," the charac-

teristics of emotion are shown to be five, viz.: elation or depression, velocity, intensity, variety, form. The author proceeds to show that the characteristics of music are these same five. He thus establishes an intermediary ground between emotion and music, and demonstrates the latter to be the appropriate speech of the former.

Music as expressive of an emotional experience such as I have attempted to describe has received many names, Pure Music, Independent Music, Absolute Music. The interpretability of this class of music will always be a difficult question. The unfolding of its content will be largely dependent on subjective, individual conditions. The mood of the listener, his prevailing habits of mind, externals of time and place, will be potent as determining influences. But it must be carefully borne in mind that even this view is sharply distinguishable from the view which denies to music all possibility of interpretation; which defines music, for instance, as "a series of moving, sounding forms." The reason for difficulty of interpretation here is not far to seek. It arises not so much from lack as from superabundance of meaning. The musician strives to compress the universe into a phrase, and we are bewildered by the labyrinthine mazes and vistas into whose midst we are placed without hint or warning.

The human spirit passes from the sphere of pure emotion into the sphere of the analytic understanding. Surely music has nothing to do with the dry processes of logical reasoning. Syllogism and minor premise, enthymeme and hypothetical judgment, induction and deduction,—the very names, cold and harsh-sounding, are enough, one would say, to make the unfortunate muse of music spread her wings, and seek shelter on some more congenial shore. But let us see.

Music has its logical aspects, and much music has been written whose merit is chiefly of a logical character. Indeed all music rests on a strictly mathematical basis. Penetrate beneath the outer garniture of sweet sound, and you shall find yourself confronted by an elaborate system of principles, whose observance is as essential to the musician as the mathematical principles of construction are to the architect. Indeed, from this point of view, music presents many resemblances to architecture. Like Michael Angelo, the titan of

architects, Beethoven, the titan of musicians, erects his gigantic temples of sound on a basis of truth indestructible as the universe. The unravelling of the mysteries of counterpoint is like learning a new language; the free activity of the spirit in these apparent fetters is far more difficult than the effort of the poet to compress his amplitude of significance into the music-box of the sonnet, or, like a new Ganymede, to sit firmly astride the soaring eagle of the ode. It is from the side of these mathematical principles of construction that music addresses the logical understanding. The interest of many compositions depends largely upon the skill of their construction, and in all this interest is a factor in the total interest. Indeed, Euler, the celebrated mathematician, is said to have composed, without any knowledge of music, an elaborate fugue on scientific principles alone; this fugue, although strictly correct, and looking very well on paper, proved ear-splitting in the performance. The interpretation of a composition, from this point of view, if the term interpretation is here at all applicable, means the recognition of the principles of counterpoint employed in its construction, and is, therefore, mainly for the technical musician. The analogies, however, between the architectonic of music and the architectonic of the soul, between the up-piling of musical temples and the building of that inner temple whose light is the everlasting spirit of God, are so many and important, that one is sorely tempted to linger here; but to this subject I can barely allude, leaving to more competent minds the elucidation of the Pythagorean arithmetic, with its harmonic ratios and music of the spheres.

Thus far, it may be said, musicians are substantially agreed. But the new school of music goes much further. It is not satisfied with a slavish adherence to rules of musical composition prescribed by a remote musical ancestry; indeed, many of these rules it wholly ignores and repudiates; nor is it satisfied with expressing the vague bliss of an incommunicable dream; it leaps, full-armed, into the lists of art, panoplied in the complete steel of the aggregate of known musical appliances, and championing the loftiest ideas of the human spirit. Beethoven and Wagner set themselves to sing, in heavenly harmonies, the "open secret" of the universe unto

men ; Liszt, in his colossal symphonic poem of *Tasso*, endeavors to paint, with music for a brush, the proper model and altitude of a man ; and what shall be said of Schubert, to whom every experience of life sang itself into a fit melody ? Is all this striving nought, useless, purposeless ? or has music an office higher than any which has been yet signified ? I now proceed to the discussion of this question.

There is a phase of human development higher than that of the logical understanding. The human spirit labors to disentangle itself from the sphere of contradictions and antagonisms in which mere understanding places it ; it seeks a pinnacle whence the whole of life shall round itself into a consistent orb, whence all finite strife shall be seen as only moments or steps in an everlasting fruition ; it seeks an abiding-place where the conflict of want and have, of emotion and thought, shall give way to a reconciliation in which both elements are transfigured in the glory of a vital union. In this highest phase of its being, the soul is one, and conscious of its oneness, amid the unceasing stream of thoughts that sweep through it. It is not in the enjoyment of a vague dream, some marvellous delirium in which its life is borne away on winds of feeling that it cannot hold in check and rein. In the calm fruition of its consciousness, it is at once the whole scope of its being and doing. Emotion and thought have been unfolded to their utmost, and signify their essential, basic identity, and unite in a life more glorious than either. The soul is at once the all of thought and the all of emotion, and from this marriage is born all art worthy the name.

The application of these principles to our subject is apparent. The new school of music speaks from the stand-point of the ideal life, the *vera vita* of the sages and mystics. Their musical conceptions, in the very act of conception, are composites of thought and emotion, and, of necessity, realize themselves as splendid harmonies enshrining a definite content. It makes no difference whether words be appended to the music or not ; the product is a composition with a definite content, apprehensible by the human reason. The road by which we climb to such an achievement may be steep and difficult, but the great masters of harmony allure us to make

the attempt by song upon song. Let no one be swift to doubt of a reality to which Beethoven and Wagner and Schumann bear witness.

From this point of view, the nature and genesis of the opera become apparent. I do not speak of the Italian opera, with its arbitrary and meaningless division into arias and duets and choruses, in which all dramatic propriety and characterization are sacrificed to exhibitions of a soprano's facility of execution or a tenor's peculiarities of voice; I speak of the real opera, the opera of the future. The musician's loftiest conceptions being a composite of thought and emotion, he develops, in the opera, both factors contemporaneously. He must be both poet and musician. From a single germ, as it were, from the one conception, grows the double fruit. According to its own inner law of unfoldment, the musical poem emerges into audibility. The arbitrary divisions into songs and choruses are cast to the winds; the noble art-creation rises all the more splendid for the added charm of articulate speech. It is a grand symphony, unbroken in its unity, and one in the intensity and depth of its effect.

The basis, the fundamental principle of the new school of music is, therefore, melody, whatever its opponents may say to the contrary. For surely melody is only the right arrangement of sounds according to some inner law, and harmony only the right interweaving of melodies, as in the association and common brotherhood of man each individual consents to union with his race, and thereby receives in return his own being more fully realized. In the violin sonatas of Beethoven, for instance, the violin and piano parts are unfolded into distinct individualities, and their identity is all the more emphatic from the full realization of their difference. The interpretability of this form of music is assured; for the soul can read in any form the meaning itself has put there. We must, moreover, bear in mind that there is here no divorce between form and meaning; if the nature of this music be once clearly understood, it will be seen that in it form is meaning, and meaning, form. It may be said that it will be impossible to attain the composer's stand-point; that different persons will give different interpretations of the same

composition. Undoubtedly this is true; but of what art-product of a high order may not the same be said: Are the critics agreed as to the restoration of the Venus of Melos? Are the critics at one as to the interpretation of Albert Dürer's fantasies in painting? Are the critics who wrangle over the absurd question of Hamlet's insanity sure that they sit in Shakespeare's seat and deliver infallible judgment? Nor do we lose any of the subtle charm arising from the infinite suggestiveness always of right attributed to music. The soul sits, as it were, at the centre, and, in an ecstasy of knowledge, comprehends at once the idea of the universe in its vital oneness ruling and reconciling the multiform differences and contradictions which are the sources of our earthly tumults and troubles. Truly has it been said that in music the soul realizes its infinitude and finds its proper dwelling-place.

Is music the mere pastime of an idle hour, the empty recreation of a leisure too luxurious to undergo the tension of persistent thought? The question has been answered in the foregoing pages. To the tired sufferer, the lingering sweetness of the nocturne speaks of a blessed peace not far to seek; to the robust thinker, the sonata and symphony present his profoundest thought arrayed in an alluring loveliness that seems caught in some golden vale of the region of dreams; to the searcher after spiritual excellence, music is able to furnish those beautiful reasons and mysterious incantations which Plato speaks of as essential to the purification of the soul; to the emotions, music is the subtlest teacher and discipliner. From the lofty atmosphere which environs the compositions of the masters, all low and vulgar and mean feelings have been banished. Music compels us into association with the life-experiences of noble souls; of it, perhaps, may be said in a sense not equally predicable of any other art, that it forces us into becoming the very emotions and thoughts of the artist; our puny individual life melts away into the broader life of the soul that, knowing the "way, the truth, and the life," labors to utter its burden of prophecy unto all men. Music is, indeed, the dialectic of the emotions; from the fret and fume of our daily existence, it leads us by sure gradations to the mountain-summits of assured knowledge and trustful faith. What a chasm yawns between



the puling sentimentality of an ordinary ballad and the majestic passion of Beethoven's "*Adelaide*"! what serene and virginal aspiration is expressed in Schubert's "*Ave Maria*!" As sculpture admits us into the temple where the heroes of the race sit in splendid calm and dignity, as painting unveils to us the mystery of the supreme moments of history and life, so music immerses us in the stream of thought suffused by emotion, which furnishes the well-springs of the purest activities of the soul. Like clouds before the wind, our sordid cares, our little ambitions, our ignoble hates and envies, are put to flight by this potent magician. Who has not sometimes wished to be, if only for a moment, the heroic soul whose life burns like a beacon on the mountain-peaks of the ages? To fruitions like these music ever invites us; to her the avenues of the mind and heart are ever open; like an angel from the heavens she enters to dwell there, bringing from her native skies both blessedness and peace.

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### MERLIN'S DISCIPLE.

By S.

In Merlin's holy cave  
The mighty word I sought,  
That called men out the grave  
And to his presence brought.  
The old enchanter came  
And told it in mine ear,  
I speak it just the same:  
The shadows then appear.  
Bright beings chant a song,  
The fairies flit around,  
The dead rise in a throng  
As when the trump shall sound.  
The golden visions dance  
Before my raptured eye,  
The world looks on in trance,  
Enchained by poesy.  
Those rainbow dreams are gone,  
No more the strains are heard,  
The world goes heedless on,  
And I have lost the word.